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HERALDS OF THE DAWN

A PLAY

WILLIAM WATSON




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THE HERALDS OF THE DAWN

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WILLIAM WATSON

THE HERALDS OF THE DAWN

A PLAY IN EIGHT SCENES

BY

WILLIAM WATSON

UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

NEW YORK
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MCMXII

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UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

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TO MY WIFE,

but for whom it would not have been written,
I dedicate this play.

W. W.

New York
Feb. 10, 1912

241223

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

MEN

Clotaire	King of Ideonia
Prince Hesperus	The King's Son
Politian, Parmenio, Erminius	Ministers of State
Volmar	Commander of the Army
Hilderic	One of Volmar's Captains
Petrus	A Judge
Brasidas	A Leader of the People
Abbo of the Woods	A Hunter and Trapper
Garlic	
Puncheon	

WOMEN

Queen Adalind — Venora — Zoraya

Guards, soldiers, attendants, ushers, and others.

SCENE: — At First the Borders of Ideonia; Afterwards, Phantasmopol, the Capitol.

TIME: — The Morrow of Antiquity.

THE HERALDS OF THE DAWN

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CALIFORNIA

THE
HERALDS OF THE DAWN

A PLAY IN EIGHT SCENES

SCENE I

Volmar's camp among the woods on the borders of Ideonia.

Night-time. Beside a stream, Volmar's tent. VOLMAR. HILDERIC. *A sentinel. Further off, soldiers sleeping on the ground.*

VOLMAR

To-day six months ago, good Hilderic,
We camped at this same place on the outward
march,
And had our first brush with the enemy.
It seemed as if each tuft of waving grass,
And every bramble and whin-bush, hid a foe.
Where are they now?

HILDERIC

We left them to the kite
And warhawk, and the grey wolf of the wood.

VOLMAR

This stream, that looks so humble a rillet, marks
The boundary 'twixt their country and our own.
Here is our native soil, our fatherland, —
There, Hilderic, the Kingdom we have conquered.

HILDERIC

This brook ran red that night thou speakest of.

VOLMAR

Ay, it did so! But Nature soon enough
Washes her hands of us and all we do.
To-night the stream runs clear as hermit's spring,
And when I drank of it this afternoon
It had no taste of slaughter. — Thou hast now
Three hours for sleep, and then at dawn we march.

HILDERIC

For home!

VOLMAR

For home! Goodnight.

HILDERIC

Goodnight, my lord.

(*Exit* HILDERIC. VOLMAR *goes into his tent, lies down and falls asleep. Enter, stealthily, from a thicket on the further side of the stream,* ABBO *of the Woods. The sentinel leans against a ledge of rock, nods and dozes.*)

ABBO

So this is how their lordly one is guarded —
The sentry drowsed and nodding at his post!
I 've slipped past all the others, and unseen
Have threaded these dark woodlands, where I know
Each tree and stone, and every cleft and cave.
Now in his tent the general is asleep.
I do not doubt but that he sleeps as well
As if he had not on his soul one sin:
The wicked sleep as soundly as the good.
Yea, it is not the Wronger, but the Wronged,
That lies awake with raging thoughts, as I
So oft have done. If I can reach him now —
One stroke — and I shall be avenged upon him,
And the next moment, in another world,
He 's cringing for God's mercy. Then — what then?
If I should fall alive into their hands?
They 'll cut and carve me out of human shape,
And laugh as they look on. I 'll hazard it.

(ABBO *moves forward to cross the stream. A loose stone slips from under his foot with a loud noise. The sentinel looks up. Other soldiers start from their sleep on the ground.* VOLMAR *raises his head and listens.* ABBO, *unperceived, draws back into the thicket.*)

SCENE II

A street. On the left, the King's palace, approached by a flight of steps. On the right, at a little distance, a fortress-prison. BRASIDAS. PUNCHEON. GARLIC. *Numerous citizens of various grade. A cripple. A beggar.*

BRASIDAS

This will I say: the war, that now hath clanged
And thundered to its end, I loved not greatly;
But its rich fruits, whether indeed they do us
Much honour in the harvesting or no,
Will fill the royal treasury to o'erflowing,
And leave small pretext for those cruel exactions
Whereby your substance is so taxed away.

FIRST CITIZEN

They tax our corn, oil, timber, metals, wool —
They tax our wine —

PUNCHEON

Ay, there 's a grievous impost —
A duty on good-fellowship, wit, and joy.

FIRST CITIZEN

How if the soldiers bring more glory home
Than booty?

BRASIDAS

There'll be waggon-loads of both,
In endless train choking the frantic streets,
Hour by mad hour.

SECOND CITIZEN

May all be well! Yet somehow
There's nothing prancing in men's hearts.

CRIPPLE

Last night
A star fell like a torch through the lit sky.

THIRD CITIZEN

They say that from his bedchamber the King
Saw it, and fearing much what it might bode
Could sleep no more.

BRASIDAS

Uneasy consciences
Take fright at lesser things than falling stars.

FOURTH CITIZEN

Bold words, in such a place! If *we* had said them,
Yon bastille were our lodging.

BRASIDAS

Well, God knows,
Its black and hungry mouth may soon enough
Gape for me too.

SECOND CITIZEN

Nay, Brasidas in prison
Would as a martyr be more formidable
Than Brasidas free, and therein lies thy safety.

FIRST ARTISAN

Make way there for the lord Parmenio.

(*Enter* PARMENIO, *going towards the palace steps.*)

FIRST ARTISAN

My lord, what of the bread-tax?

SECOND ARTISAN

And the salt-tax?

THIRD ARTISAN

Ay, and the poll-tax?

FOURTH ARTISAN

And the hearth-tax?

FIRST ARTISAN

Are
These to be done away with? or the burden
A little better suited to the back?

PUNCHEON

What of those crushing wine-duties, my lord?

BEGGAR

We've heard that doles and bounties are to be
Given to the poor.

GARLIC

And the deserving idle.

FIRST ARTISAN

Silence, thou simpleton.

SECOND ARTISAN

Is it true our debts
Are to be blotted out?

BEGGAR

Are prisoned folk
To have their liberty?

GARLIC

And old offenders
To be rewarded?

THIRD ARTISAN

Fool, tie up thy tongue.

FOURTH ARTISAN

Shall we have cheaper food?

FIRST ARTISAN

And cheaper justice?

(PARMENIO, *having ascended the palace steps, pauses at the threshold and faces his interrogators.*)

PARMENIO

Good people, is it seemly, at the King's
Own door, to pelt me with your questions thus?
I go to him even now, that I may learn
From his own mouth his full and fixed intent
Touching the things you speak of, and to-morrow
Yourselves shall learn it too.

FIRST CITIZEN

Give us to-day
At least an inkling of it. We all know
That you live close to the King's mind.

PARMENIO

A King's
Mind is so sentinelled and guarded, one
May live hard by it and ne'er have seen within.
Yet, as I would not you should go away
Famished for news, such knowledge as is mine
I will impart. 'T is known to you already
That any day, and almost any hour,
May witness the return of glorious Volmar,
Our greatest soldier, and perfect flower of war,
From conquest of the hereditary foe,
Bringing his captives with him, and his spoil,
Trophies, and treasure. Now the King intends
That this same treasure, which is rumoured vast,
Shall be applied to the easing of that burden,
That hard load of taxation, borne by you
Not without murmur, and upon you laid
With most reluctant hand. And furthermore,
From the proud hour of Volmar's homecoming,
The King ordains a seven days' festival
For all his people, his own revenue
To bear the cost. Lastly, so royal are
The scope and range of his benevolence,
He will decree the pardon and release
Of all such men in prison —

(*hesitating*)

POLITIAN

(*coming from within the palace and standing beside* PARMENIO)

As may be freed
With safety to the state.

PARMENIO

Ev'n so, my lord
Politian. Now, good people, you have heard
The King's benign intentions. Go you therefore
To your own homes, with loyal and pious hearts,
Thanking yon Heaven that hath so blessed our arms.

(*Exit* POLITIAN)

FIRST CITIZEN

Long live the King.

SECOND CITIZEN

Long live the Count Parmenio.

FIRST ARTISAN

Taxation abolished!

THIRD CITIZEN

Nay, nay, not so fast.

GARLIC

A seven weeks' feast!

SECOND ARTISAN

Seven days, old maunderer.

THIRD ARTISAN

Come, let us spread the news.

PUNCHEON

If they 'll repeal
Those taxes on conviviality —

SECOND ARTISAN

Yes, let us spread the news. 'T is a great day.

GARLIC

There has not been its like since the millennium.

(*Exeunt* GARLIC *and* PUNCHEON. *Others, on the point of going, remain when* BRASIDAS *speaks.*)

BRASIDAS

Honoured Parmenio, you are known to all
As one not hard to approach, when men crave light
On things that touch their bosoms. Will you tell us

What order of offenders these may be,
For whom their prison doors are to fly open?
The common felon? the prowling man of prey?
The cutpurse and the cut-throat? Is it to these
You 'll grant a new lease of the sun and sky?

PARMENIO

Brasidas, they whose judgment guides this realm
Allow you a large liberty of speech:
Allow to them some liberty of silence.
In statecraft there are things that cannot be
As public as a peepshow at a fair.
The council chamber of a King is secret,
Even as the heart and inwards of thy body
Are secret. To uncover their hid workings
Were to destroy thee, body and heart and all.

BRASIDAS

Oh, there 's a world of secret things, my lord,
You've touched not on; and since you will not tell me
What men are to be freed, who then are they
You mean to keep in bonds? Are they the wretches
Denounced, in secret, for what cause we know not,
And after secret trial hurried down

Where secret night hugs them with iron arms?
'T is a plain question, worth a plain reply.

PARMENIO

You call your words a question: they are rather
An accusation and a wild indictment
Hurled against law and justice.

BRASIDAS

Law and justice!
When was I not the fieriest of their lovers?
Those I indict are they that make the law
A byword and a hissing. Turn not thou
Away, but hear me. In yon prison-house
My father suffers for a deed he did not,
And there is he in fetters, where this light
We call impartial sends him scarce a beam.
Oh, justice is a word that you keep near you,
But she, Justice herself, hath long been banished,
And somewhere far from all the abodes of Law
Her place of exile is.

PARMENIO

Your private griefs
Are known, and in some measure may be held
To excuse the violence of your tongue. But try not

The patience of Authority too far.
Insulted Power can any time cut short
The freedom you misuse.

BRASIDAS

I do defy it
To lay a hand upon me. With a signal
I could call forth a host as from the ground,
Who, if you dared to cast me in yon prison,
Would batter down its walls founded in blood,
Its doors dabbled with blood, its towers that rise
Out of a fen and rank morass of blood,
Unpacified blood, not to be quieted,
Not to be put to sleep in the earth at all.

(*Exit*)

PARMENIO

A man so covered with a foam of words
Proclaims himself bankrupt of argument.

(*Exit into palace*)

FIRST ARTISAN

Well, that is as it may be.

SECOND ARTISAN

For my part,
I think our Brasidas had the best of it.

THIRD ARTISAN

We could see plainly which one feared the other.

A CITIZEN

You all must own, Parmenio bears no blemish
As husband, father, or friend.

THIRD ARTISAN

Why, there's an adage,
'The greatest villains never break a law,'—
Not that I hint at villainy in his lordship.

FOURTH ARTISAN

Come, let's remember in what place we stand.
They say the gallows hath put some to silence
Because they thought too loudly.

(*Re-enter* PUNCHEON)

FIFTH ARTISAN

As for me,
I 've a great mind to go about my business;
For I begin to think that politics are
A study should be left to learned men,
Such as astronomers, and the best-born clergy.

PUNCHEON

There be few thirstier studies. It begets
A marvellous great drouth in a man's throat.

FIFTH ARTISAN

My study is mending shoes.

GARLIC

Mend thou thy manners,
And stand not gabbling 'neath the very nose
Of greatness. Seest thou not yon lords?

(*Enter from the palace* POLITIAN *and* PARMENIO, *who stand in the doorway.*)

THIRD ARTISAN

They look
Severely on us.

FOURTH ARTISAN

Our free speech has been
O'erheard.

FIRST CITIZEN

I am called hence on urgent business.

SECOND CITIZEN

Mine own affairs press furiously.

THIRD CITIZEN

Mine, too,
Call loudly for me.

FOURTH CITIZEN

Come, let us begone.

(*Exeunt all persons in the street.* POLITIAN *and* PARMENIO *descend the steps.*)

POLITIAN

Mind you, I do not say that the belief
In signs and omens and the like is nought
But vulgar superstition; for indeed
I never did deny that these things are.
But why should *we* befog our intellects
With such dark matters? Life is not too clear
At broadest noonday, and these messages
Dropt from the void are written in a cypher
Of which we lack the key.

PARMENIO

True, true enough;
But meet you not a strange mood in the land?

No gaiety gambols by — and here and there
Men congregate like birds that have forewarning
Of dread events in Nature.

POLITIAN

We'll divert
Their minds with shows and pageantry. Such toys
Put that great babe, the People, in good humour.

(*Enter* ZORAYA)

But who is this? Old as the cliffs she seems,
Yet as unbowed as they are. What would'st thou with us?

ZORAYA

My errand is to speak unto the King.

POLITIAN

Impossible. He is sick, and hath much need
Of slumber.

ZORAYA

They that sent me do not sleep.

POLITIAN

And who are they, good dame?

ZORAYA

They are the Powers
That spin the secret threads of life and death.

PARMENIO

Thou art she the people call the prophetess?

ZORAYA

Too great a title. I receive, at most,
Blurred intimations of what is to be.
I am tantalised with Heaven's half-confidences.
I am hurt with flying splinters of the truth.

PARMENIO.

Speak what thou knowest. If evil be at hand,
Whom does it menace?

ZORAYA

I can only tell thee
That doom hangs o'er this day, and *here* will fall.
Nought more do I know.

(*Exit*)

PARMENIO

She gives to it no form
Our senses can lay hold on.

POLITIAN

For my palate,
This diet is a thought too translunary.
I have lived my life with things that can be touched,
Tested, and weighed.

PARMENIO

Yet there are other things.

POLITIAN

Oh, there are things which better brains than mine
Ere now have dashed themselves to pieces on;
But if I break my pate, 't is little solace
To have broken it sublimely, against the stars.
Here our ways part —

PARMENIO

Until we meet again
An hour past noon.

POLITIAN

That time when day, like me,
Grows middle-aged and unromantical.

(*Exit*)

PARMENIO

How covetable that strictly bounded mind,
No shreds of twilight hanging loose upon it!
Mine own leans out into the Dark, and so
Hazards its very balance, in hope to catch
The footfall of events ere they arrive,
And from the Dark wins nothing. 'T is to no purpose
One plays the eavesdropper about Fate's door.
The servants there are incorruptible,
And will not sell one secret to the world.

(*Exit*)

SCENE III

A room in the palace opening widely on a garden, which lies in brilliant sunshine. PARMENIO *alone. To him enter* POLITIAN. *In the garden an aged gardener at work.*

POLITIAN

Where is the Prince?

PARMENIO

Here I await him now,
But he forgets.

POLITIAN

His studies more and more
Engross him. History, polity, jurisprudence —
He takes them all as steps by which to mount
Toward the crowning art of ruling men.

PARMENIO

He does not seem disdainful of the art
Of wooing women.

POLITIAN

There I think he trusts
Rather to Nature. Hark, I hear his foot.

(*Enter* PRINCE HESPERUS)

PARMENIO

Highness, what news of Volmar?

HESPERUS

He hath crossed
The mountain ridge already. His messengers,
Sent spurring on before him at the dawn,
Have just arrived. Hither he marches slowly,
Much cumbered with the greatness of his spoil,
But ere the daylight droops it is believed
He will be here. There is a grassy knoll
From whose smooth shoulder he will first look down
Upon the city. Then will his trumpeters
Sound out their taratantara on the air,
Blowing a silver salutation to us.
All hath gone well — save only that I fear
This sickness of the King will somewhat tarnish
Our pomps, and give a greyness and a pallor
To our rejoicings.

PARMENIO

But he hath great power
Of rallying! Is he not in the garden?

HESPERUS

Ay, there
My father sits, quite worn out with the chase.

PARMENIO

The chase?

HESPERUS

Three nights and days he hath hunted sleep,
And still it flies and flies.

(*Enter* VENORA, *followed by a waiting maid carrying needlework.*)

VENORA

Do I break in
Upon high matters?

HESPERUS

Yes, sweet lady, you
Break in upon them as the snowdrop breaks
In upon January.

VENORA

I cannot do
A stitch of this embroidery to-day;
(*to her maid*)
Yet leave it. (*Exit maid*) I have but one thought
— a hero
Comes homeward, beautiful with victory.

POLITIAN

A great and fair occasion. I remember
One very different — the return of Rainald
From miserable defeat.

HESPERUS

Him that was called
A whirlwind on a warhorse in his day.

VENORA

A weeping welcome would be his, I doubt not.

POLITIAN

A silent one — save for a few that hissed.

VENORA

O shameful! I'd have stripped the summer of all
Its roses, to make sweet the ways for him.

HESPERUS

Alas, we oft are prone to do as they did:
The man whom Fate hath scourged we scourge again.
To-day let us forget these things.

VENORA

How darkly
Yon cedar reaches out its solemn arms!
I am a little sorry for the flowers
That have to live so near it. Their gay thoughts
Seem chidden and put down by its grave bearing,
And for their sake I think that I could almost
Wish it away.

HESPERUS

Ah, know you not its story?
Then listen. It was mine ancestor Alexius,
The founder of our house, who long ago
Did with his own hand set that tree in earth;
And 't is affirmed that our own royal fortunes
Are with its life bound up: if it decay,
We wither; while it flourishes we flourish;
But when it dies we fall from sovereignty,
And wear a crown no more.

VENORA

Then will we hope
The tree keeps young in heart, for I have heard,
That is the secret of long life in all things.

(*Enter, in the garden, the* KING.)

Look where the King himself walks toward it.

HESPERUS

With what slow, feeble steps!

VENORA

Since I have been
A guest within these walls, I never saw him
Leaning upon his staff so wearily.

KING

(*touching the tree caressingly*)

Still sound — still sound and hale. How many
a time
In troubled dreams have I beheld thee maimed,
And stricken through with death! But in clear
daylight
Is not all well with thee? Art thou not full
Of great desire to live for ages yet,
And is not great desire strong as resolve?

Oh, that I had some sovereign prophylactic,
Able to drive far from thee all disease,
And all decay for ever!

HESPERUS

Is it meet
That we should gaze on his distempered mood?

VENORA

It is not kind.

HESPERUS

Let's forth into the sun.

KING

(*to the gardener*)

Fellow, what things in Nature may they be,
What powers of earth or air, that most do threaten
The life and welfare of a tree like this?

GARDENER

Why, King, a tree be in many ways mightily like a man. Now if a man feed well, and live orderly, and keep a still mind, and have no very great shocks of trouble, he may come to a wonderful great age. And so is it with trees. But there

is the weevil, now, that eateth through the bark: unto the tree he is like gnawing care, cark and care, and in time he will let in death to the very heartwood. Then there be long droughts, whereby the tree is stinted of its right meat and drink: that is want — woful want — and good trees hath it killed. Then there are fell tempests also; these be great shocks, and they do not come and go without leaving their mark somewhere, though the eye may see it not.

KING

How long might this cedar yet live?

GARDENER

Why, King, that is most hard to tell. But it may live a long while yet, except it die suddenly by the act of God.

KING

What meanest thou?

GARDENER

I mean naught else but the lightning, the thunderbolt; for that is the act of God.

KING

Ay, truly. And if the lightning should split this trunk, I fall at one stroke from Kinghood to an estate which a beggar might despise. For then should I and mine in a moment be but as your mock princes, your hide-and-seek pretenders, that go pranked in a sort of out-at-elbow greatness, and posture through life, demanding the reverence no man pays, and for ever sighing over lost occasions; the very phantoms of majesty. To come to that in a twinkling! How terrible a thing may be the act of God!

GARDENER

Oho, there is rottenness in this branch. This in time would open the door to death. This bough must be lopped straightway.

(*Enter* QUEEN *in the garden*)

KING

(*The gardener lops the bough*) — Hold, sirrah!
Oh, what is this that thou hast done?
I felt his blade strike through me here.
(*He staggers, the* QUEEN *supports him.*) Queen! —
wife! —

What ruthless surgeon have they sent to me,
That gashes me in the side, and leaves unstaunched
The wound his bistoury gave?

QUEEN

Nay, King, thou hast
No hurt at all. But thy long sleepless nights
Have sorely jarred thy brain. The air to-day
Is of a fevering heat in this closed garden.
I know not if 't is good for thee.

KING

My mind
Fell ghastly sick one moment; but thy voice
Hath ever unto me a healing sound,
And I am well again.

QUEEN

Let us go in.

(*They enter the palace. Enter from another side* POLITIAN, PARMENIO, *and* ERMINIUS.)

ERMINIUS

Your Grace, I have discovered and frustrated
Yet one more foul design — these letters here

Attest its deadly nature — to subvert
Your rule, and overthrow the throne itself.

KING

(*glancing at papers*)

The air hums with conspiracies to uproot me.

ERMINIUS

Sir, during this your ever blessed reign,
I have unearthed in all ten several plots
Against your Majesty's most sacred life.

POLITIAN

(*aside*)

After inventing at least nine of them.

ERMINIUS

I wait not the full hatching of these treasons,
But crush them as it were in the very egg,
Almost before there is —

POLITIAN

(*aside*)

A hen to lay it.

ERMINIUS

(*to* POLITIAN)

My lord, I wish you nobler occupation
Than piecing out another's sentences.

POLITIAN

Forgive me; it was a crude attempt to show
How I esteem the diligence and despatch
That under your direction have so marked
Our judicature.

ERMINIUS

If this be irony,
I understand it not; for none denies
That in our courts Conviction with all promptness
Follows upon the heels of Accusation,
While Execution lags not far behind.

KING

The authors of this plot —

ERMINIUS

Are all in irons.

KING

Why is yon fellow Brasidas still at large?
He brawls under my windows like a fishwife,

Hawking sedition of so rank an odour,
Stale fish were lavender to it.

ERMINIUS

Majesty,
We do not think him dangerous. He has
Indeed no following save a sort of men
Whose thought will never ripen into action.

KING

Thought has been tolerated much too long.

ERMINIUS

It is indeed most troublous.

KING

Look you to it
That from to-morrow he be in safe keeping.
We 'll see whether the chastening prison diet
Give any touch of fine austerity
To an eloquence a little overblown.

ERMINIUS

Consider, sir, — at such a time, — the man
Being so popular —

POLITIAN

And to do him justice
He is rather a good quality of windbag.

PARMENIO

I have no cause to love him. But oft such men
Are to the State as boiling springs to the earth,
That vent her plethera and so cool her fever.

KING

Enough — enough — I see you are all in league
With them that plot against me. It is to you
I owe it that I cannot sleep i' the night
For menacing voices, yea, and furtive hands,
That draw aside the curtains of my bed,
And only fail of their intent by some
Mighty interposition. Get you gone
Out of my house. What are you — counsellors?
Counterfeits rather — mimes — semblances — spectres.
Out of my house: is it not haunted enough
Already? Go.
(*Exeunt* POLITIAN, PARMENIO, *and* ERMINIUS.)

QUEEN

Dear lord, these altercations
Do only leave thee shattered. Put all discord
Far from thy mind, and let us walk again
Among the agreeing flowers.

KING

Presently
I 'll to the garden with thee; and in truth
My life is well-nigh bounded by its walls.

(*Paces the room, then pauses.*)

The air is very heavy and still. Almost
Would night seem to have trespassed upon day,
So dark it grows.

(*Enter* HESPERUS *and* VENORA *from the garden.*)

HESPERUS

Dark? Doth he jest? If not,
Then, in the name of sunlight and all splendour,
What fantasy is this? Father, I think
A brighter day never lit up the world.

KING

Have I no eyes? For all permitted uses
I have a pair as serviceable as thine. —
No palsy in them.

PRINCE

But the spirit's fatigue
May for a time oppress the lucid vision.

KING

I tell thee I can see as well as thou;
And were there any falseness in a man,
Though he were mine own child, I should espy it.
I 'll put my sight to the test before you all.
Lady, thy finest, thy most tenuous needle!
And now a thread, the slenderest filament
Thou hast. If quickly through this needle's eye
My hand persuade the silken thread to travel,
Wilt thou still hold me purblind?

(*He attempts to thread the needle.*)

Nay, I cannot!
It is this wan, blear, and untimely darkness
Baffles mine eyes.

PRINCE

Strange, he should talk of darkness,
When all above us is perfect blue and gold,
And there is not a speck upon the day.

KING

(looking out upon the garden)

Still darker. It is that great silent moment
When stands the packed and loaded storm, in doubt
Whether to hurl the thunderstone or no.
The massy blackness builds itself as a wall,
With towers that topple upon us; and there are faces,
Puckering enormous brows. Cannot a man
Cherish a cedar and watch over it,
And ravel up his heartstrings with its fibres,
But soon the very heavens must seek it out
With an especial malice, to work its ruin?
Stay, thunder, in thy caverns! Or burst forth,
And mow down all the forests of the world
With thy hot scythe, so thou but spare these boughs,
Whereon the fate of Kings yet unconceived
Trembles. Ah, now the storm breaks from its moorings,
And the forked fury with its jagged leap
Already is on us. It strikes the tree: the cedar
Is riven to its anguished roots — it falls asunder,
Crashing unto the earth, and bears us with it,
Pulled from our height of place and royal station

For ever. Now am I a King no more,
And thou indeed art a King's son no more,
And thou — thou art queenly still, but Queen no more.
Thy hand, — here will I rest a little.
(*He totters into a chair.*)
Tear off
This purple lie: we are nothing now — or only
A proverb of the unstableness of the earth
Beneath the feet of princes.

QUEEN

If he could
But sleep awhile, that were the sovereign balsam,
And waking he would be himself again.

(*A sound of distant trumpets. The* KING *lifts his head and listens.*)

VENORA

Hark!

HESPERUS

It is Volmar greeting us from the hill.

(*The* KING *sinks into sleep.*)

SCENE IV

The same. HESPERUS, *booted and spurred.* VENORA.

HESPERUS

The hours go nimbly, — it is almost time
That I were riding forth to meet the hero.

(*Enter* QUEEN)

How is my father?

QUEEN

He is in deep sleep.

HESPERUS

His chiefest need!

QUEEN

I think that when he wakens,
The thick cloud will have lifted from his brain.

HESPERUS

And he will be again the King we knew.

(*Enter an usher*)

USHER

An officer of General Count Volmar's,
Sent in advance of the returning forces,
Craves access to this presence.

HESPERUS

Let him in.

(*Enter* HILDERIC)

Is it not Hilderic?

HILDERIC

It is, my lord.

HESPERUS

A brave and skilful soldier. Thou art welcome.

HILDERIC

The General, who will soon be at the gates,
Hath sent me on as bearer of this gift
Of jewels, if her grace will not disdain it.

(*Servants bring in a treasure-chest.*)

(*To* QUEEN) Lord Volmar bade me say, that he himself
Hath little learning in their qualities,
And should there be among them things of nought,
He begs you'll pardon both the gift and giver.

QUEEN

Why, here are sapphires, rubies, emeralds —

VENORA

Calcedony, and sardonyx, and jacinth —

QUEEN

And every coveted gem the earth conceives.
A lordly gift indeed!

HESPERUS

Thou bringest jewels,
But it is news we are most greedy of.
Draw me a picture of the war, as thou
Didst see it.

HILDERIC

Well, sir, it hath been a fierce
And bitter strife. For at the outset, mark you,
The enemy did so stubbornly resist,
Even to the point of wild foolhardihood,
That nought was left us but to throw away
All mercy, and strike terror deep and wide.
Therefore did we let loose those trusty hounds,
Rapine and Fire; and ever as we marched,
We lit our way with blazing farms and hamlets.
But when we had put whole cities to the sword,

And plentifully had sown the seed of famine
By wasting all their fruitfullest land, the rest
Was easy; for the people's spirit then
Being broken, they looked on with listless gaze
At their own ruin, and we now bring home
The spoil of temples and of palaces,
The choicest treasures of a once rich Kingdom,
Leaving behind us peace, and a great stillness.

VENORA

On what a deep, wide base of other's sorrow
Is built to-day our joy!

HILDERIC

Ay, madam, that
Is true enough; but 't is the sort of truth
To which we soldiers have to give the go-by.

VENORA

Yet surely there's a place in heroes' hearts,
Where pity for the fall'n hath lodging?

HILDERIC

Madam,
I have a little son, some five years old,
As pretty a rogue as you should wish to see,
Who has an army all of painted tin —

A standing army — till he knocks it down —
And then, what pity has he for the fallen?

HESPERUS

Not much, I 'll swear.

HILDERIC

Well, as he plays *his* game,
So play we ours — upon a larger table.
But play it on a kingdom or a carpet,
'T is still a game. 'T is the great Game of War.

HESPERUS

Which men play basely or nobly, as themselves
Are base or noble. But take it as we will,
Destruction is a destroying, slaughter a slaying.
We cannot yet make war as we make love,
Carry a citadel by a serenade,
And ride into a fortress on a sigh.
For war is war, its chronicles at their best
Dreadful, and at their worst an inventory
Of all that is in Hell.

QUEEN

Come, let us look
Once more at these rare treasures. Amulets

And signets — cameos and intaglios —
Here's wealth enough to dower an emperor's
daughter!

HESPERUS

Had Volmar flung a province in thy lap,
'T were scarce a richer offering.

VENORA

Do but mark
The wondrous workmanship! — stone after stone
Carved into shapes of life, or overwrought
With fancies, dreams, out of old Grecian story.
Here Hermes binds Ixion to the wheel;
Here is the yet unfreed Andromeda;
Here Theseus slays the Minotaur; and there
A naked soul quails before Rhadamanthus,
The cold judge of the dead. On this is figured
The maiden goddess of the bow and quiver;
On this, Medea drives her dragon team.
Lo, Psyche here, at last made one with Eros,
And all her sorrows over. And on that sard
You may behold Achilles, not in wrath,
But with a brow of pity, as when he mourned
Penthesilea.

HESPERUS

Carven in green jasper
Here stands Actaeon, by his own hounds torn,
As men are torn by their own fierce desires,
Who hunt delight too madly.

VENORA

And upon
This amethyst Arachne at her loom,
Daring to match the perfect woof of Pallas,
Weaves her own perfect woe.

QUEEN

Hardly a gem
But tells some ancient tale — alas, how oft
A mournful one!

VENORA

Here is a priceless stone
So rudely wrought it must be wondrous old.

HESPERUS

Rather I think it but of our own day.
For Art, being in its childhood barbarous ever,
In feeble age grows barbarous again,
Its second childhood reached. Yet here is not

A jewel but might fittingly adorn,
At to-night's feast, the lovliest brow or bosom.
To-night, good Hilderic, thy great commander,
And thou and all his captains, sup with us;
And if the fare be worthy of the guests,
This house will not have seen a goodlier banquet.

HILDERIC

We'll bring brave appetites, I'll take my oath on 't,
And some of us a valiant thirst to boot.

HESPERUS

The jocund lamplight hath a happier secret
In drawing heart to heart than the staid day,
And under it we'll all meet joyously.

SCENE V

The street in front of the palace, crowded with all sorts of persons in gay attire, amongst them ABBO *of the Woods, conspicuous in sombre rustic garb. In the doorway of the palace, the* QUEEN, HESPERUS, VENORA, POLITIAN, PARMENIO, *and other courtiers and ladies.*

ABBO

Nay, friend, grudge me not a little standing-room.

FIRST CITIZEN

But thou requirest so much of it. Thou art made on such a large pattern.

ABBO

Well, well, we are none of us built after our own planning — else thy nose would have been shorter.

CHORUS OF VOICES

Ha, ha, ha!

SECOND CITIZEN

Who planned that coat of thine?

FIRST CITIZEN

In what King's reign flourished thy tailor?

THIRD CITIZEN

Did thy clothes come out of Noah's Ark?

ABBO

Now ye should all be grateful to me, seeing that my old homespun doth the better set off your finery.

FIRST CITIZEN

Ay, to be sure it doth. And no doubt thy garments were fashionable enough in Methuselah's time.

FOURTH CITIZEN

Come, let the man alone. He hath an honest country face.

SECOND CITIZEN

Ay, and acres of honest country mud on his boots.

FIRST CITIZEN

Hark, they are at hand.

VOICES IN ANOTHER STREET

Long live Volmar! Hail to the conqueror!
Long life to Volmar! Hail, Volmar!

(*Enter* VOLMAR *riding at the head of his army accompanied by* HESPERUS.)

VOICES

Hail, Volmar! Long life to the victor! Glory to Volmar and all his host! Hail to thee, Volmar! Honour to the conqueror! Hail, hail!

(VOLMAR *dismounts and is met on the palace steps by the* KING *and* QUEEN, *and others of the royal household.*)

KING

Welcome, most noble Volmar. You went from us
Under a pelting hail of men's good wishes,
To come back in the sunshine of their praise.

VOLMAR

A very thunderous sunshine, Prince, so loud
The people cheered us.

HESPERUS

And what sound on earth
Matches the crash and peal of a people's joy?

QUEEN

Our welcome of you is in softer key,
But not less truly 't is the heart that speaks it.

KING

Forgive me that I rode not forth to meet thee
Beyond the walls, as I would fain have done;
For gladly had I seen, from afar off,
The mingled dust and glitter of thine approach,
But the infirmities of this vext clay
Here held me bound and captive. Take thou now
The thanks that unto valour and lofty service
Are due, and if I use a poor pale word
For want of nobler, hear thou in it only
Its wealthiest meaning. I am forced to drink
Deep of inglorious rest, a thing I loathe —
For in my youth they taught me that to rest
Is to rust also; but to-night we revel,
We feast together, thou and I and mine;
And we will talk of all the battles thou
Hast fought, and the great wars we both have known,

And the great warriors; and with memories such
As these we 'll fledge the hours.

VOLMAR

Ay, sir, we'll make them
Flee like your routed foes. And sweet, indeed
To us that long have fed on soldiers' fare,
Sweet will it be, to gather at thy table,
Exchange the rough life of the camp and field
For princely cheer, princely companionship,
Forget the reek of carnage in the breath
Of ladies' lips, and speed the night on wings
Of wassail, and drink down the morning star
In cups of triumph!

ABBO

Go drink of Hell's flood tide.

(*Plucks a dagger from his breast and flings himself on* VOLMAR.)

VOLMAR

Off, off, vile peasant!

(*Is stabbed and falls. Shrieks of women. Wild commotion.*)

VOICES

He is stabbed to death!
Volmar is murdered!

QUEEN

Murdered — at our door?

(*The* KING *sinks back and is supported by his courtiers.*)

HESPERUS

Seize the assassin.

(*Leaps into the street, followed by* PARMENIO *and others.* ABBO *is surrounded and stands warding off attempts to overpower him.*)

FIRST CITIZEN

Seize him.

SECOND CITIZEN

Show him no mercy.

THIRD CITIZEN

Despatch him.

A SOLDIER

Flay him first.

FIRST CITIZEN

Rend him in pieces.

HESPERUS

Stay! Harm him not!

A SOLDIER

O Prince, this churl has killed
Thy noblest.

HESPERUS

(*bending over* VOLMAR'S *body*)
Are ye sure the wound is mortal?

PARMENIO

Perhaps it is not past the healer's skill.

AN OFFICER

Yea, 't is his heartblood overflows these steps.

A SOLDIER

Dead — dead, my lords.

HESPERUS

O miserable end!
Thou shouldst have fall'n in splendour of battle, slain
By some most glorious sword — and here thou liest,
Thy flame of life put out by yon base hand.
Who art thou, wretch?

ABBO

My name is Abbo. Where
I dwelt, men call me Abbo of the Woods.

HESPERUS

Have I not somewhere looked upon thy face?

ABBO

I cannot tell.

A SOLDIER

Suffer us now to slay
This man.

HESPERUS

Again I charge you, harm him not!
Stand off from him. So great a murderer
Shall fall not thus, beneath your casual steel.
No single arm shall hew him down haphazard,
Nor aught less than a realm and people be
His executioner; for he shall have
Justice, a thing more terrible to the wicked
Than random vengeance. Take ye him away,
And set strict guard on him. Deny him not
The smallest customary privilege
The law decrees for men yet uncondemned.
Omit no form, fulfil each due observance,

And let him, at the fitting place and time,
Be brought to trial and judgment, that hereafter
None shall have cause to say of us, 'They gave
The violent up to violence, and delivered
Unto the lawless them that broke the laws.'
Take ye him hence and do no wrong to him.

SCENE VI

The same. Enter from one side a countryman with his wife and child. From the other side GARLIC.

COUNTRYMAN

Good master, is it true that there is to be no shows or plays or feasting?

GARLIC

Ay, the King hath in his infinite wisdom forbid them by reason of this great man's death.

COUNTRYWOMAN

We might as well ha' stayed at home.

GARLIC

Have ye travelled far?

COUNTRYMAN

A matter of twenty mile.

GARLIC

I had an uncle was a great traveller in his youth, but he made a true repentance and died

a right godly man, much honoured as a cheese-monger.

COUNTRYMAN

Was not this a very great man indeed that was killed hereabouts?

GARLIC

Ay, he was a very great man. He was, as ye may say, an ensample to us all. Have ye not heard what a world of trouble and mischief he was ever stirring up? That is the sure sign of your truly great man.

CHILD

Mother, what is a great man like to look at?

COUNTRYWOMAN

Lord, child, how should I know, that never saw one?

CHILD

I should fear to meet one on a dark night.

GARLIC

When I think upon such greatness as was his, I seem in mine own eyes to be scarce more than an ordinary mortal. Were ye never here before?

COUNTRYWOMAN

Never in all our days.

GARLIC

There is much ye might see with profit. Yonder, now, is our famous jail, and if ye go round by the northeast side ye will espy the gallows. A nobler gallows you could not wish for.

COUNTRYWOMAN

We had a most fair prospect of it as we came by.

GARLIC

Well, I must now bid you good-day. See that ye fall not among evil company. These be graceless times and there is fearful regeneracy around us.

(*Exit*)

COUNTRYMAN AND COUNTRYWOMAN

Good-day, good master.

(*Enter from opposite sides* BRASIDAS *and a* CITIZEN)

BRASIDAS

All is in readiness. You will not forget the hour?

CITIZEN

God forbid.

(*Exit*)

BRASIDAS

(*to the countryfolk*)

Have ye any friends in this city that could protect you from harm if need were?

COUNTRYMAN

Nay, sir, we know not a soul.

BRASIDAS

There may be tumults. If you are wise, you will go back to your village. I counsel you for your good.

COUNTRYMAN

Sir, I am sure thou dost. We will go back to-night. I would we were home now on our farmstead.

(*Exeunt countrypeople*)

BRASIDAS

Good simple folk, what mummery and trumpery they come hither to gaze at! and at home they have the great pageant of the harvest, and all the sweetness of the earth at their doors.

SCENE VII

The same. Night-time. Enter BRASIDAS *near the prison. He knocks at a barred window.*

BRASIDAS

What tidings?

(*The window is slightly opened and a light flashed on his face.*)

VOICE WITHIN

Is it Brasidas?

BRASIDAS

'T is he.

VOICE

The flax field is in flower.

BRASIDAS

Goodnight.

VOICE

Goodnight.

BRASIDAS

So all is well. He hath the signal-word
At his tongue's tip. And yet was that the voice
I thought to hear? Yes, all is well. And soon
My sworn and faithful will have gathered to me,
And by connivance of the friend within,
Long ere the dawn, this fortress of foul night,
This house of groans, this place of shuddering,
Will be delivered up into our hands,
With all its secret archives, that will show
Tyranny with her gorgeous vesture off,
Her very self, stripped to her soul. And yet,
Did not the voice sound unfamiliar?
No, all is well; misgivings must not now
Trammel the hot wheels of Resolve, when fate
Hangs on a filament of gossamer.
It is the cavernous and deep-mouthed night,
That gives unto all voices its own accent.

(*Enter* ZORAYA, *going towards the palace steps.* BRASIDAS *conceals himself in shadow.*)

ZORAYA

Here was it done, here was he taken and slain.
They have not even washed the blood away.
Or is it the red hue of porphyry

That under this perverting and sick light
Can mock mine eyes? Nay, it is blood itself,
Haunting these steps. But Oh, thou murdered
man,
It was by far, far redder steps than these
That thou didst climb to what men take for
greatness.
Thou wert more cruel than the forest fire,
Thou wert more callous than the lean-lipped sea.
And thou didst climb and climb as a sleep-walker
May climb a mountain knowing not it is Etna
Till headlong down its sulphurous throat he falls.
I hear a step. Is 't Brasidas?

BRASIDAS

None other.

ZORAYA

Friend, whatsoever scheme or undertaking
Thou hast in hand, attempt not on this night
To shape it to a deed.

BRASIDAS

How hast thou heard?
To none hath it been breathed, save them that
were
To act with me.

ZORAYA

No matter how I know,
Or what I know. But if thou should'st proceed
With what thou did'st intend, expect disaster.

BRASIDAS

Whence, then, does hidden danger threaten?

ZORAYA

Enough
That something thou would'st war against is strong
To-night, and watchful. What indeed it is
I do but dimly see. It rises like
A crag that hurls back a besieging wave.

BRASIDAS

I know thee full of truth as of strange foresight,
And this thy warning chimes with mine own doubts,
That were but now with difficulty stilled.
If I put off this enterprise, what then?

ZORAYA

Have thou a little patience. Let time work.
Slowly the spirit of the world itself

Is bringing to the birth all thou did'st dream,
And with thee or without thee shall thy cause
Prevail.

BRASIDAS

My cause is nothing less than man's.

ZORAYA

Then it *must* conquer.

BRASIDAS

Unless Evil have
Indeed celestial warrant, and gross wrong
Be something at which deity itself
Connives. But *that* I 'll ne'er believe. — Zoraya,
There's not much passes within palace walls
But thou dost know it — or so runs the rumour:
What hast thou heard to-night touching the King?

ZORAYA

At first, when he looked on at Volmar's death,
Horror quite smote him down; but shaking off
His weakness like a mantle, he rose as though
Calamity had girded up and braced him,
Such quick rebound of spirit he hath.

BRASIDAS

Some say
He carries, in a ring upon his finger,
Drops of a wondrous potion, a quintessence
Not to be used save in extremity,
But able to call back the escaping life
Even when in act to fly.

ZORAYA

And some declare
It hath quite opposite virtue.

BRASIDAS

Ah! — who knows?
Tell me one other thing. In these last days
Do any tidings of my father reach thee?

ZORAYA

He is no more in prison. This very morn
He was set free, by one who soon or late
Does from these corporal bonds enlarge us all.

BRASIDAS

What, is my father dead? Dead in a dungeon!

(*A great bell tolls the hour of one.*)

ZORAYA

That was the voice of the new day. Farewell.

(*Exit* ZORAYA)

BRASIDAS

Farewell. The new day. It was time the old
Went to its rest. The new day — the new day!

SCENE VIII

A Court of Justice. PETRUS *in the judgment seat.* ABBO *of the Woods arraigned before him. The* QUEEN, VENORA, *and others sitting as spectators. Guards, scribes, officials. At the back of the Court the populace.*

PETRUS

The crime, which with deliberate fell intent,
Before a multitude of witnesses,
You did notoriously commit, and here
Acknowledge by your own mouth without shame,
Is one, the like whereof hath not been seen
On this our soil, within men's memory.
You took your victim, the most noble Volmar,
All unawares, in the great hour that crowned
His glorious life, and slew him on the steps
Of the King's palace, with the same stroke wounding
The heart of a whole people.

(*Enter* HESPERUS)

From that hour
Till now, all justice and all fairness have
Been shown to you. Nothing which might avail you,
In this your trial, hath been to you denied.
You have been proffered, and you did refuse,
The services of one who, by vocation
A pleader at the Bar, would have set forth
Whatever might be urged in your behoof,
With suasive art and skill. Nought now remains
But to pass judgment on you, and apportion
Your penalty to the greatness of that guilt,
Which in its full height stands before the world,
Manifest to all men's eyes.

HESPERUS

Most learned Judge,
I crave indulgence for what well might seem
A lawless trespass upon this tribunal.
No least infringement of its sanctity
Do I intend. Indeed, though I have ne'er
Sat amid those who practise in our courts,
Yet have I, without favour, or the relaxing
Of due and rigorous tests, attained to hold
A mastership and doctorate in our laws,
Such as do fully entitle me, if so

I list, to take my stand with professed pleaders,
The brotherhood of the forensic robe.
Nay, in the quality of an advocate,
Not else, do I claim audience in this court;
And though it be at the eleventh hour,
And almost one can see the headsman's finger
Trying the axe, I call for stay of sentence,
Till I can bring before you certain matter
Unbroached yet in this trial, but none the less
Most pertinent to the issue.

PETRUS

At your desire
Judgment shall stand deferred, and aught you say
Shall here be gravely pondered.

HESPERUS

Prisoner,
What King is he whom thou dost serve?

ABBO

King Othgar,
Thine enemy.

HESPERUS

In whose land wert thou born?

ABBO

King Othgar's land, which ye made war upon.

HESPERUS

Where was thy dwelling?

ABBO

In the forest, near
The boundaries where King Othgar's land meets thine.

HESPERUS

(*to the* JUDGE)

Now, as it chances, tidings which to-day
Have reached us from those confines make it plain
That, notwithstanding Volmar's victories,
A state of war hath never truly ceased.
Still on the frontier do its smouldering embers
Flash daily into angry life, and though
The enemy's hosts in battle on battle were quelled,
Their Kingdom, as a Kingdom, ne'er did make
Formal submission, nor hath any pact
Or treaty of peace been signed, and, in a word,
A state of war still to this hour obtains;
Whence I contend that this man's act, the slaying
Of his own countrymen's arch-enemy,

Was in its essence a pure act of war,
Entitling him to no more grievous usage
Than all those captives of our arms receive,
Whom we condemn to labour in the mines
Or at the galleys.

PETRUS

I must count your plea
As but a specious one. Nought hath been here
Adduced in proof that this man's action flowed
From any founts akin to public virtue
Or patriot zeal. You give to his deed a colour
Which its own doer perchance would disavow.

HESPERUS

(*to* ABBO)

What moved thee to the deed? Tell unto us
Its story.

ABBO

On that border, where till now
My dwelling was, there grew I up from birth,
And lived by hunting of great forest beasts,
And selling of their furs, and tusks, and hides.
Alone I dwelt, save that my child, my daughter,
A damsel ripening unto womanhood,

Dwelt with me. And it came to pass, when first
Ye marched against my country, that your armies
Were thereabouts encamped a little while;
And one day, toward eventide, the maiden,
My daughter, by rude hands laid hold upon,
Was taken and carried unto Volmar's tent,
That he might have his will with her, and there,
Upon that night, he forced her to abide.
And in the morn she was cast out among
The soldiers, to be slave to any man's
Desire. This was I told by one that knew.
But ere another sun went down upon them
They found her body, slain by her own hand,
For she and Shame could not live on together.
And in the woods I abode, and when your hosts
Marched back that way, with the camp-followers
I mixed unknown, and with them hitherward
I came. And God was good to me. He gave
Into these hands the man they hungered for;
And I did take and slay him in his pride.
And could I slay him a thousand times again,
That would I do.

PETRUS

Thus is the prisoner's act,
Save in the greatness of the victim, seen

To stand with common crimes of private vengeance.
As for his private wrongs, and whether these
Do in some measure palliate his offence,
With all such questions I am unconcerned.
I sit not here to deal in casuistry,
But to administer the law. His crime
Was open and flagrant, and if I myself
Did inwardly incline to pardon him,
I could not. The prerogative of pardon
Dwells with the King alone.

HESPERUS

Then to the King
I make appeal.

KING

Thou might'st, with as good fortune,
Appeal to the dead hero, that lies stark
In his yet unclosed coffin, as to me.

VENORA

O King, remember this man's mighty woe.

QUEEN

If thou had'st but a daughter of thine own —

VENORA

(throwing herself at his feet)

Thou hast! for this thy son and I are wedded,
Though never until now told we the world.

KING

What, secret spousals? When a King's son mates,
His bride should be the daughter of a King.
Yet never saw I in thee aught unlovely,
Or aught unwomanlike — or any fault
Save what is common to all thy sex, for being
Women, ye think a Kingdom can be swayed
By women's tears — ye set a peasant's wrongs,
And the light handling of a country wench,
Above a mourning realm.

QUEEN

Girl, with this kiss
A queen makes thee her daughter. King, thy wife,
Thy son, thy daughter, sue for this man's pardon.
Have pity, have pity upon him.

KING

Let pity know
Its place and season. Pity gone astray
Hath led men blindfold to the wilderness,
Whither I 'll follow it not. This miscreant's hand

Hath robbed me of a man whose worth to me
Was that of armies. If I pardon him,
May Heaven in anger —

HESPERUS

Oh, speak not some wild word
Thou 'lt wish to unsay.

KING

You Powers, whate'er ye are,
That weigh us in your balance — if I show
Mercy unto this murderer, straightway then
Visit me with your signal malediction,
And let some visible stroke of instant fate
Wither me into ashes, even here
Where now I stand.

HESPERUS

My task was hard before,
And in a moment it is made thrice harder;
But come what may I will not flinch from it.
Prisoner, I now must lead thy memory back
Unto a certain morn, seven years ago,
When all that border-forest round thy dwelling
Rang with the hunters' bugles. On that day,
There, in a thicket, and by chance divided
From his companions, lay a stripling, gored

Deep by some savage tusk, and bleeding nigh
To death. And thou did'st find and bear him thence
Unto thy dwelling, and did'st dress his wound,
And with a rough but heartening wine thou did'st
Bring back the life that else had ebbed too far.
Hast thou a recollection of his face?

ABBO

'T was strangely like thine own.

KING

(*to* HESPERUS)

The man dissembles.
Thou art mistaken in him — he does but catch
At the offered cue, and play up to thy thought.

HESPERUS

(*to* ABBO)

Then with returning breath I bade thee ask
Whate'er thou would'st in recompense, but thou,
Who knewest not who I was, would'st only take
A trivial gift, a thing of little price.

ABBO

Not so — it was thy jewelled hunting horn.

HESPERUS

Whereon I bade thee blow a blast to call
My comrades, which thou did'st; but when they came
Thou wert not to be found, and they declared
That something either less or more than human
Had tended me and vanished.

PETRUS

(*to* ABBO)

Hast thou still
That hunting horn?

ABBO

In my wood hut it lies,
But long ago I plucked from it the gems,
And sold them, being in need — two greenish stones,
With figures cut upon them. One did seem
A huntress, and the other was a stag
Torn down by hounds.

HESPERUS

Diana one — the other
Actaeon, fabled to have been transformed
Into that antlered shape. Here are some gems

Whereon those very figures that you speak of
Are, with a varying fancy, deftly carven.
Canst thou point out the two, if here they be,
Which from that horn thou sever'dst? This is one —

ABBO
(*examining the gems*)
That is the other.

HESPERUS
True. These two alone
Are portion of that gift which Volmar gave
Unto the Queen — those jewels brought by him
From this man's country; and these two I well
Remember, as having once been set in gold
On that same bugle of mine.

KING
Woe, woe is me!

VOICES OF THE POPULACE
Pardon the man. Release him. Let him go.

KING
Have I not called on Heaven to smite me down
If I should show him mercy?

VOICES

Set him free.
He saved thy son.

KING

The dread Power I invoked
Is swift to take us at our word, and bind us
To the letter of our contracts.

HESPERUS

King, my father, —
God is more just than thou dost picture Him.
Dost thou suppose He is a bartering God,
That makes a profit out of our poor folly,
Alert to seize on our unwariness,
To catch us tripping and stickle for a price?
And should'st thou dare to do a worthy thing,
Dost thou imagine that the august Begetter
Of all this world shall then fall short of thee
In righteous dealing?

KING

He hath me in His hold,
And thou, who art young, know'st not how hard it is
To slip out of a bargain made with Heaven.

VOICES

Pardon the man. Free him. He saved thy son.

(*Enter among the populace* ZORAYA)

ZORAYA

Hear me, O King! There is one only way
For thee to cut this knot. Lay down thy King-
ship;
Then shall a King succeed, who hath not yet
Pledged him to cast out Mercy, but will rather
Beckon her to an almost equal seat
Beside great Justice.

VOICES

A word in season. Ay,
A wise word. Abdicate. Uncrown thyself.

KING

Ye cannot be as weary of your King
As he is weary of Kinghood. I will do
Your bidding. I am very humble now.
See, I make way for another — for a King
Not bound, like me, by a rash covenant
With the exacting skies.

(*He breaks the seal of his ring, which he places to his lips. He staggers and sinks back.*)

QUEEN

O help, ere he
Be gone! Help!

VENORA

Then the ring had poison in it!

KING

He whom I sent for loiters not, but hither
Rides at full speed. Wife, thou didst ever have
Great patience with me.

HESPERUS

Can we do nought at all
To ease thy going hence?

KING

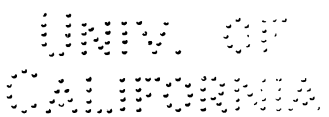
There's nothing needed.
After this tangled life, death seems a thing
Most excellently simple.

(*Dies*)

HESPERUS

He is dead.
He who alive had much infirmity
Hath strongly laid life down. Whate'er his faults,

We'll think them not himself, but outermost
Apparel only, and fold them all away
In silence. As for thee, who standest there
And seest thy vengeance full and perfected,
The King alone could pardon thee, and I
Am henceforth King. Take then from me forgiveness,
And go thou back to thine own land in peace.



THE END

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